



January 7, 2009

A New Approach to Student Discipline: An Opportunity to Teach and Learn

There are volumes of research available to help schools tackle the most stubborn roadblocks that stand between students and their highest achievements. For example, every year there are new studies to show how achievement, student discipline, graduation rates, truancy and citywide juvenile crime are interconnected.

With all of the challenges that urban schools face, one of the encouraging conclusions I draw from this research is this: when schools and the community can work together to address even one of our most stubborn obstacles, the effects of this good practice ripple across a district to weaken the other obstacles schools and students face.

In Washington, DC, however, this ripple effect has not been working for us. Why? One reason is that the student discipline policy that has existed for years, is not designed to teach students to learn from their mistakes, and it does not support teachers to teach the behaviors that advance student achievement. In fact, those who look closely at the current policy and how it is being implemented tend to conclude that it is contributing to our truancy and drop-out rates.

A Cycle We Can Break

Many of our students become trapped in a cycle that is connected to inconsistent enforcement of a poor policy. High truancy and drop-out statistics then put pressure on the larger community to keep our young people safe and redirect them back to school once they have left.

We know all about the power of peer groups to influence student behavior, and once the ripple effect hits peer groups that are disengaged from school, we have a significant problem. As more and more middle and high school students see disengagement as an example for their lives, we have a situation in which schools and the entire community must provide incentives more powerful than compelling peer group examples that collectively disorient younger students from following a path to high achievement.

This saddens and frustrates thousands of teachers, parents, and principals who are deeply invested in re-engaging students who become caught up in this cycle. It illustrates how important just one factor in the “student achievement equation” can be, and how much dysfunction can occur when one of those factors, such as student discipline, is “off” in a school or system.

But there is good news here: it also shows us the enormous gains students can make if we work together to improve one, and eventually each, of the variables that would keep us from balancing this equation.

Community Forums to Propose Revisions

This month we are concluding a year-long process focused on revising the way student discipline is implemented in DC. For the past year we have been reviewing Chapter 25 of the DC Municipal Regulations--the student discipline policy--with groups of teachers, students, parents, community advocates, district administrators and other staff.

Together we created a set of proposed revisions which we will be discussing with the larger community through [three public forums during the month of January](http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/schedule_forums.htm) [<http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/schedule_forums.htm>](http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/schedule_forums.htm) . Once we hear from the larger DC community, we will revise again and send the policy to the DC Council this February. We hope to see it take effect in the spring.

What Needs to Change, and Why?

The [current policy](http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/schedule_forums.htm) [<http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/schedule_forums.htm>](http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/schedule_forums.htm) has led to a practice in which student discipline is primarily used to punish students and remove them from the classroom and from school. With only 2 categories of infractions and their consequences, even students in pre-kindergarten can be suspended for minor infractions.

Out-of-school suspensions occur far too frequently, and students who are suspended often fall far behind in their work and become more likely to become truant, and more difficult for teachers to re-engage in the classroom.

However, a good student discipline policy can be used as a tool to teach students to learn from their mistakes, re-engage them in their classwork after they have seen the appropriate consequences of their actions, prevent further occurrences of the behavior in the future, and ultimately to raise student achievement levels and engage students in the behaviors that will help them to excel.

A good student discipline policy reflects clear and high expectations for students. It contains structures and supports to help educators teach students to meet those expectations. It ensures that schools can act quickly and effectively when rules are not followed and expectations are not met.

Ultimately, it supports all students—those who clearly need work to improve their behaviors, and those who are in the classroom learning with them—to grow socially and to understand more fully the effect of their behaviors on others and on their own achievement.

Finally, an effective student discipline policy is progressive. Disciplinary actions must be just and appropriate to the infraction.

Our current policy does not reflect these characteristics, and a student who runs in the hall can receive the same consequence as a student who hurts another student. Other consequences make no sense at all, such as delivering an out-of-school suspension for truancy. Instead, a good policy supports schools to make the link between behaviors, consequences, and achievement very clear, and educators help students to understand those links through practice.

Proposed Changes

Among other changes, with our school and community groups we have created a new system that separates student behavior into 5 tiers instead of 2, and it assigns appropriate consequences with different levels of infractions for each tier.

It increases peer mediation and conflict resolution supports to schools, practices which have shown to be effective in helping students correct their behavior before suspension is necessary.

In addition, it limits the time allowed for at-home suspension and provides more support to schools with supervised off-site suspension when off-site is necessary. I invite you to review our proposed changes and attend one of our forums to hear more and provide your input.

Enforcing the Policy

We also must ensure that the policy is consistently enforced. As we complete our community forums and gather more input from the community, we will read the feedback, post it online and use it for our final revisions. The skills, leadership and hard work of principals will be critical in implementing the new policy, which is why it is especially important to support our school leaders throughout this process.

We will be working with principals so that they have the tools they need, and holding them accountable for this work through their performance evaluations. Expanded data systems will better support them to track student discipline.

We will also be engaging parents in this effort as we create the information management tools to give them accurate and timely information about their children, and to fully engage them in the solution for the challenges children face as they grow.

Ongoing Challenges in Student Discipline: What Does it Take to Meet Them?

Student discipline is no easy issue. Some of our students have not yet learned the best ways to interact socially in a world that will present difficult consequences for problematic behavior. (This is hard enough for adults to learn!). Educators understand that teaching social behavior that supports learning requires clear expectations, consistently practiced consequences that respect students and their growth, and a great deal of patience, innovation, and outreach to families.

Because this is a challenge for even the best principals, teachers, and schools, we must use the new policy to remove the obstacles and work with schools to enforce a policy in which we all will be invested.

I look forward to creating a new ripple effect in DCPS, one that moves in a different and positive direction this time as it moves from students and classrooms to hallways, schools and the DC community.

To learn more about the upcoming forums and download relevant documents, visit the [Chancellor's Forum page](http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/schedule_forums.htm).
<http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/schedule_forums.htm>

To reply to this e-newsletter, send an email to Peggy O'Brien, Chief of Family & Public Engagement, at Peggy.O'Brien@dc.gov.

Please share this e-newsletter with colleagues and friends! If you know anyone who would benefit from receiving this e-newsletter, feel free to forward it.

If this e-newsletter was forwarded to you, please click here to add your email address to the list.
<https://service.govdelivery.com/service/subscribe.html?code=DCWASH_140>

For past editions of this e-newsletter, visit the [Chancellor's Notes' Archives](http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/communiques/chancellorsnotes.htm)
<<http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor/communiques/chancellorsnotes.htm>> .

This e-newsletter is provided to you by:

District of Columbia Public Schools <<http://www.k12.dc.us/>>
Office of the Chancellor <<http://www.k12.dc.us/chancellor.htm>>
825 North Capitol Street NE, 9th floor
Washington, DC 20002
202-442-5885